Protocol papers published in *Journal of Physiotherapy* will strengthen the profession

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This 59th volume marks the first occasion of publication of clinical trial protocols in *Journal of Physiotherapy*. A trial protocol is a document that is developed before a research study commences. It provides the background and justification for the trial, describes the trial method, and documents how the data will be analysed. Protocols of clinical trials have been published in a number of health science journals for several years. It is recognised that this process helps to improve the standard and communication of health-related research in the following ways (Chalmers and Altman 1999, Eysenbach 2004):

- Allowing readers to compare the planned trial with how the trial was actually conducted
- Increasing transparency of statistical analyses, so that ‘data dredging’ can be easily identified and so that null, negative, or inconvenient findings are less likely to be concealed
- Assisting recruitment of potential trial centres and participants by increasing the visibility of upcoming trials
- Reducing duplication of research effort by enabling other researchers to see what trials are underway.

In addition, trial protocols are likely to be of value to clinical physiotherapists because they:

- Help physiotherapists easily stay abreast of the cutting edge of physiotherapy research
- Inform physiotherapists about current knowledge gaps and new ideas that drive the development of clinical trials
- Increase awareness of future directions in physiotherapy practice, which may facilitate a smoother transition of new research evidence into clinical practice
- Promote awareness of physiotherapy researchers around the world who are leaders in their field of practice.

It is the intention of the *Journal of Physiotherapy* Editorial Board that the protocols published in this journal will provide these benefits to the research and clinical communities. In alignment with the Journal’s standards of publication, published protocols will describe flagship trials that have been funded by nationally or internationally competitive funding schemes. The abstract of each protocol will be published in the printed issue, accompanied by a commentary from a distinguished expert in that field. The aim of the commentary is to help readers understand the potential impact that the trial will have on physiotherapy practice or the way we understand therapeutic modalities and/or diseases managed by physiotherapists. The commentary will also highlight important strengths and limitations of the trial that will aid readers with their interpretation of the trial. The full trial protocol will be available online, for those who wish to read further detail about the study.

While the publication of trial protocols is one important step that can reduce misconduct in the publication of research findings, it is by no means a panacea for such wrongdoing, which may be the result of ineptitude or scientific fraud (Hush and Herbert 2009). For example, a review of protocols published in *The Lancet* found instances where the primary and secondary outcomes and subgroup analyses were different from those in the protocol (Al-Marzouki et al 2008). These insights from a leading medical journal with experience of publishing trial protocols have been useful in the development of clear criteria for authors considering publication of a trial protocol in *Journal of Physiotherapy*. Specifically, this Journal requires authors to provide a clear and logical description of the trial justification, a detailed description of the trial design, outcomes, interventions, and procedures. Particular attention will need to be paid to the planned analysis of data, so that the primary analyses and pre-planned secondary and subgroup analyses are described clearly and in their entirety. It is recognised that modifications to a trial protocol are not uncommon and are often brought about by factors outside the direct control of the investigators. Any such variations to the published protocol that occur during the conduct of the trial must be disclosed in full in the results papers and not be concealed.

The full range of benefits of published trial protocols will only be realised with detailed and complete description of the trial’s intended methods, open and transparent disclosure of any variations to the trial protocol by authors, and diligent comparison of manuscripts or papers reporting a trial’s results against the trial protocol by editors, reviewers, and readers. In this issue of the Journal, a trial protocol has been published that examines the theoretical rationale of the Kinesio Tape method; it is the first of a series of protocols of trials whose results will shape physiotherapy practice in the years to come.

### References


